

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is episode 49.

Last time, both Song Jiang and Hua Rong had been arrested -- Song Jiang for supposedly being the leader of the Clear Winds Mountain bandits and Hua Rong for being in cahoots with the bandits by his relationship with Song Jiang. They were being escorted to Qingzhou Prefecture by Huang Xin, the commander of the prefectural army, and Liu Gao, the commandant of Fort Clear Winds who had arrested Song Jiang and reported Hua Rong to his superiors in the first place, starting all this trouble.

But on their way to the prefectural seat, this entourage was intercepted in a forest. While Liu Gao was busy peeing his pants, Huang Xin, being a military guy, wasn't so frightened and useless. He rode forward to check out what's going on, and he saw that his party had been surrounded by about 500 bandits, all looking stout and vicious, donning red headscarves and padded tunics, and armed with swords and spears.

Three heroes now leaped out from the woods and blocked the road, one in black, another in green, and the third in red. They all wore the same style gold-embazoned headscarves, wore a short broadsword around their waist, and wielded a long-handle broadsword. These three were the bandit chieftains from Clear Winds Mountain -- Yan Shun the Multicolored Tiger, Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger, and Zheng (4) Tianshou the Fair-faced Gentleman.

"All travelers must stop here and pay 3,000 taels of gold before you can pass!" the three chieftains shouted.

"Mind your manners!" Huang Xin shouted from his horse. "I am the Suppressor of the Three Mountains!"

The three chieftains glowered and shot back, "Even if you are the suppressor of 10,000 mountains, we still require 3,000 taels of gold for the toll. Without it, none shall pass!"

"I am a commander on official business; I have no money for you," Huang Xin said.

Uh, yeah, remind us of the part where we care about any of that. The three chieftains laughed and told him, “Even the emperor himself would need to pay the toll to pass through here, much less a mere commander like you. If you don’t have the money, then leave the prisoners here until you come back with the money.”

Obviously, these guys were looking for trouble, so Huang Xin got mad and ordered his men to beat the drums of battle as he wielded his sword and galloped toward Yan Shun, the top chieftain. All three heroes gripped their long-handle broadswords and came forward to fight Huang Xin.

Now, Huang Xin may be a skilled warrior, but he wasn’t fighting just run-of-the-mill robbers here, and it was one against three, so after about 10 bouts, he was starting to falter. Meanwhile, that Commandant Liu Gao, being a civil official, was not only no help at all, but in fact, he was getting ready to cut and run.

Worried that he might slip up and get captured by these bandits, which would kind of make a mockery of his “Suppressor of Three Mountains” nickname, Huang Xin decided the best thing to do was to turn and run, the hell with everyone else. So he just galloped back to Clear Winds Town by himself.

Seeing that their commander had ditched them, the soldiers were all like, thanks but no thanks, and they scattered, leaving Liu Gao there by his lonesome with the two prisoner carts. Liu Gao was about to turn and ride away, but just then, some of the bandits tripped up his horse with a rope, sending him tumbling to the ground. The bandit lackeys then swarmed forward and captured him alive.

By now, Hua Rong had already broken out of his prisoner cart. He jumped out, busted out of the ropes that had bound him, and smashed open Song Jiang’s cart and rescued him. The bandit lackeys took off Liu Gao’s clothes and gave them to Song Jiang, and helped him onto one of the horses that had been seized and escorted him up to the bandits’ stronghold. Following behind were Hua Rong, the three chieftains, and the bandit lackeys, along with their half-naked prisoner Liu Gao.

As it turned out, the three chieftains had dispatched some scouts to Clear Winds Town to find news about Song Jiang. They reported back that the poop had hit the fan, so the chieftains devised this ambush and rescue, which honestly proved much, much easier than it probably should've been. I guess it helps when the enemy's commander decides to run away after just a few bouts.

By now it was about 9 o'clock at night, and the heroes all gathered in the main hall at the bandit stronghold. With Song Jiang and Hua Rong seated in the center and flanked by the chieftains, they ate and drank, and all the lackeys were rewarded with wine as well.

Hua Rong told the three chieftains, "Thank you for rescuing me and my brother and avenging us. This is a kindness that will be difficult to repay. But my wife and sister are still in Fort Clear Winds. They will be arrested by Huang Xin for sure. How should we save them?"

"Commandant, don't worry," Yan Shun assured him. "I don't think Huang Xin would dare to arrest your family. But if he does, he would still have to come down this road. Tomorrow, my brothers and I will go and retrieve your wife and sister."

After Yan Shun dispatched some scouts and Hua Rong thanked him for his kindness, Song Jiang said, "Bring me that Liu Gao."

Yan Shun chimed in and ordered his men, "Tie him up to the column in the hall and cut out his heart to help our brother celebrate."

"I'll do it myself!" Hua Rong declared.

Once Liu Gao was tied to the column, Song Jiang scolded him. "You scoundrel. I have never done you any wrong. Why did you listen to that wicked woman and try to do me in?! You're my prisoner now; what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Brother, why even ask him anything?!" Hua Rong interrupted as he plunged a knife into Liu Gao's chest and with one twist, removed his heart and presented it to Song Jiang.

While the bandit lackeys busied themselves with removing the corpse, Song Jiang told his friends, “Even though we’ve killed this filthy animal, his whore of a wife is still alive. Our vengeance has not been satisfied yet.”

“Brother, don’t worry,” Wang Ying the Stumpy Tiger said. “Tomorrow I’ll go and capture her, and this time, I’ll get to enjoy her.”

And everybody had a good laugh at that promise to abduct and rape a woman, and they drank to their hearts’ content that night before turning in. The next morning, they reassembled to discuss how to attack Fort Clear Winds.

“Our men are exhausted from last night,” Yan Shun said. “Let them rest for a day, and then we’ll head out tomorrow.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Song Jiang said. “We should rest and rebuild our strength rather than rush into battle.”

While they were taking an extra day of R&R, brave commander Huang Xin had fled back to Fort Clear Winds and ordered the troops there to keep a tight watch. He then sent an urgent dispatch to Qingzhou (1,1) Prefecture to ask Prefect Murong (4,2) asking for help. When Prefect Murong saw the message telling him that Hua Rong had gone rogue and allied with the bandits, and that Fort Clear Winds was in danger, he quickly sent someone to fetch the general in charge of all the armed forces in the prefecture. This general’s name was Qin (2) Ming (2). He had an explosive temper and a voice like thunder, which earned him the nickname the Fiery Thunderbolt. He came from a family that had been military officers for generations. He wielded a wolf-toothed mace and possessed the valor of 10,000 men.

Upon receiving the prefect’s invitation, Qin Ming hurried over, and Prefect Murong showed him the letter from Huang Xin. And living up to his reputation, Qin Ming immediately flew into a rage.

“How dare those bandits act so recklessly?! Sir, have no worries. I will mobilize my troops right away. If I do not capture these bandits, I swear I will not come back to see you!”

“General, if you delay, those bandits might attack Fort Clear Winds,” the prefect said.

“How would I dare to delay? I will mobilize my troops tonight and set out first thing tomorrow.”

The prefect was delighted by Qin Ming’s eagerness, so he prepared wine, food, and rations for his troops. Qin Ming was still fuming over Hua Rong’s treason as he stomped out and rode back to headquarters to call up 100 cavalry and 400 infantry. He ordered them to assemble outside the city and prepare to march.

Meanwhile, in a monastery courtyard outside the city, the prefect had prepared a heap of steamed buns and big bowls of wine. Every soldier going on this mission was rewarded with three bowls of wine, two steamed buns, and one catty of meat. Just as all the preparations were finished at daybreak, he saw the troops coming out of the city in an organized formation. At their head rode Qin Ming, clad in his armor and looking quite the ferocious warrior.

When Qin Ming saw that the prefect was waiting for his troops outside the city, he quickly handed his weapon to one of his men and dismounted to greet the prefect. Prefect Murong then poured him a cup of wine and told him, “May all go well and may you soon return in victory.”

After all the soldiers received their rewards, a cannon sounded, and Qin Ming took his leave of the prefect and led his troops on a quick march toward Clear Winds Mountain.

Word of these troop movements soon reached the bandit stronghold on Clear Winds Mountain. The heroes there were in the midst of planning their assault on the fort when they got word that Qin Ming was leading troops this way. This news left them all in silence as they exchanged nervous glances.

But then, Hua Rong spoke up. “Have no worries. As the old saying goes, ‘When the enemy approaches swiftly, they must be stopped in their tracks.’ Have our men eat their fill and do as I say. First we meet them with force, and then we beat them with cunning.”

Hua Rong then proceeded to explain his plan, and Song Jiang raved, “Excellent idea! Let’s do as you suggest.”

So it was decided. As the bandit lackeys got ready, Hua Rong went and picked out a good horse, a suit of armor, a spear, and a set of bow and arrows. And then, they waited.

Soon, Qin Ming and his troops arrived at the foot of the mountain. They set up camp about 3 miles away from the mountain, and the next morning, they made breakfast at 5 a.m. Once the men finished their meal, they fired off an explosive as a signal and the whole army marched on the mountain. They found a flat, open spot, lined up in battle formation, and started beating drums to challenge the bandits for combat.

Momentarily, the earthshaking sound of gongs echoed from atop the mountain, and a squad of bandits sprinted down the hillside. Reining in his horse and gripping his mace, Qin Ming took a closer look. He saw that the oncoming bandits were led by none other than Hua Rong. When they arrived at the foot of the hill, they too lined up in battle formation.

Sitting atop his horse and wielding a spear, Hua Rong offered a gesture of greeting to Qin Ming, but Qin Ming barked, “Hua Rong, your family has been officers for generations, and the court gave you a post, appointing you as a commandant overseeing a region and receiving a stipend from the state. When did the court ever do you wrong? Yet you rebelled and joined up with bandits. I have come to arrest you. If you’re smart, then dismount now and surrender, so I don’t have to get my hands dirty.”

Hua Rong put on a smile and said, “General, please hear me. How could I be willing to turn against the court? In truth, it’s all because of that Liu Gao stirring up trouble where there was none and abusing

his powers to settle personal scores. He left me nowhere to go, so I have temporarily taken refuge here. I hope you can understand.”

“If you don’t surrender now, what are you waiting for?” Qin Ming said, unmoved by Hua Rong’s words. “Stop spewing nonsense to try to fool my men.”

Qin Ming now ordered his troops to beat the drums, and he raised his mace and galloped toward Hua Rong. Hua Rong laughed and said, “Qin Ming, you really don’t know any better. I was showing you respect because you were my superior officer. Do you actually think I’m afraid of you?”

So Hua Rong rode forward, and the two tangled in a dogged back-and-forth. They fought for 40-some bouts without either gaining the upper hand. After a while longer, Hua Rong suddenly feigned an attack and then turned and rode off toward a narrow mountain path. Qin Ming was pissed off and gave chase. But as he was riding away, Hua Rong latched his spear and pulled out his bow and arrow. Suddenly, he turned and fired off a shot. It struck Qin Ming on the top of his helmet, knocking off the tassel. Basically, that was a message to Qin Ming: Yeah, I could’ve easily killed you, but I let you off light.

Qin Ming was startled by this display of marksmanship and did not dare to pursue farther. Instead, he turned around to attack Hua Rong’s men, but they had all scampered back up the hill by now. Meanwhile, Hua Rong also made his way back up to the bandit stronghold via a different path.

Seeing his prey disappearing, Qin Ming grew even angrier. He ordered his men to beat drums and gongs and start advancing up the hillside. So his army started to move, led by the infantry. But they had only made their way around a couple peaks when suddenly, they were pelted from the cliffs above by a hailstorm of logs, rocks, bottles of lime, and, just to add insult to injury, vats of feces. The advance guard couldn’t turn back in time, and 40-some men met their death. The rest, meanwhile, retreated.

Qin Ming, impatient by nature, was now fuming. He led his troops back down the hill to look for another way up. They searched and searched until around noon, when suddenly, they heard the sound

of gongs banging from the west side of the mountain and saw a squad of bandits flash out bearing red banners.

Qin Ming and his men rushed in that direction, but by the time they got there, the gongs had fallen silent, and the red banners had vanished. And there were no real roads there, only a couple small footpaths that only woodcutters took, and they were all blocked by fallen trees and branches.

Qin Ming was just about to order his men to start clearing a path forward when suddenly, one of his soldiers reported that they heard gongs and saw red banners appear on the east side of the mountain. So Qin Ming and his army rushed toward the east, and won't you know it, it was the same thing. By the time they got there, there was no sign of any bandits and no passable road up the hill.

Oh, and just then, another scout rushed onto the scene to say that the gongs and red banners were now partying on the west side of the mountain again. So here we go again. Qin Ming rushed over to the west side, and again found no one. By now, Qin Ming was so worked up that he could've ground his teeth to powder. But just then, the gongs were banging from the east again. Qin Ming, not being the brightest candle in the world, rushed east again. And surprise, surprise, there was no one over there this time either.

Just as he was about to send his men out to look for a road up the mountain, Qin Ming could hear gongs and battle cries from the west side again. He was about to explode at this point, but he decided that maybe the third time would be the charm, so he took his army and rushed over to the west. But yeah, no dice again.

Qin Ming had had it, and he ordered his men to start looking for a way up on either the west or east side. One of the soldiers said, "There are no real roads here. There's only a major road on the southeast side that leads up. If we try to go up the mountain here, there might be a trap."

"Since there's a major road, then let's go there at once," Qin Ming said.



By now, it was starting to get dark, and Qin Ming's troops had been running all over these hills all day long, so they were exhausted. When they arrived on the southeast side of the mountain, they were just about to set up camp and make dinner when suddenly, torches lit up the hillside and drums and gongs started banging.

Qin Ming, once again consumed by rage, rode up the hillside with about 50 cavalymen, but they were met with a shower of arrows from the woods, which wounded some of his men and forced them back down the hill. Qin Ming had no choice but to turn back and ordered his troops to focus on making dinner.

No sooner had his men started the fires for their stoves did they see about 90 torches flashing down the hillside. Thinking that these were a raiding party, Qin Ming quickly led his men in pursuit, but just as quickly as they appeared, the torches vanished. And it was a cloudy night, so the moonlight was not bright enough for them to see in the dark.

Qin Ming, now working on a 24-hour-long rage, ordered his men to set the woods on fire. But just then, he heard the sound of lute and drums drifting down from above. He rode up a bit and saw a dozen or so torches on a summit. Sitting in the light of the flames were Hua Rong and Song Jiang, drinking wine and having a good ol' time.

Qin Ming, with nowhere to vent, now cursed out loud from down below. But Hua Rong just shouted back, "General, hold your horses. Go rest, and I'll come fight you to the death tomorrow."

"Damn rebel! Get your ass down here right now, and let's fight 300 bouts and then talk!" Qin Ming yelled.

Hua Rong laughed and replied, "General Qin, you are tired. Even if I beat you right now, it won't prove my superior skills. Why don't you go rest and come back tomorrow?"

Yeah, that was likely. Qin Ming kept cursing from below and even thought about finding a way up the mountain, but then, he was also wary of Hua Rong's arrows, so all he could do was stay down below and hurl profanities.

Just as the insults were getting good, Qin Ming suddenly heard a ruckus from his own troops. He quickly rushed back and saw his men besieged by explosives and fire arrows from above, while from behind about 30 bandit lackeys were taking cheap shots at them, hiding in the darkness and shooting arrows at them. Qin Ming's troops fell into disarray and crowded into a deep ravine for shelter.

By now it was almost midnight, and just as Qin Ming's troops were trying to dodge arrows, they were suddenly swept up in a torrent of water that came roaring down the hill. All the men and horses were engulfed. Those who managed to struggle their way to dry land were quickly subdued and captured alive by bandits, while those who couldn't make it to dry land drowned in the ravine.

Qin Ming was now shooting steam out of the top of his head and his ears. Just then, he spotted a small path, so he followed it up the hillside on his horse. But he had not gone but 30-some paces when suddenly, the ground underneath gave way, and he and his horse fell into a hidden trench. Fifty bandits sprang out, all armed with long hooks. They latched on to Qin Ming with their hooks and pulled him out. They removed his armor, helmet, and weapon, and tied him up. They also pulled his horse out, and took both up to the bandit stronghold.

So, after all that, of the 500 men that Qin Ming had brought with him, the majority had drowned in the ravine. Only about 150 men managed to escape that fate, but they were all captured alive, along with about 80 horses. Not a single man in Qin Ming's army got away, including Qin Ming himself.

It was starting to get light out when the bandit lackeys escorted Qin Ming to the stronghold. Song Jiang, Hua Rong, and the three bandit chieftains were all seated in the main hall. When the lackeys

brought Qin Ming in, Hua Rong quickly leaped to his feet, came down, personally untied Qin Ming, and kowtowed to him.

Qin Ming hurriedly bowed in return and said, "I am your prisoner. You may do with me what you will. But why do you kowtow to me?"

Hua Rong again sank to his knees and said, "Our men did not recognize you and accidentally gave offense. Please forgive us."

He then got a fresh set of clothes for Qin Ming. Qin Ming now asked Hua Rong, "Who are those heroes over there?"

"That is my sworn brother Song Jiang, the magisterial clerk from Yuncheng County. And the other three are the chieftains of this fortress: Yan (4) Shun (4), Wang (2) Ying (1), and Zheng (4) Tianshou (1,4)."

"I recognize those three chieftains," Qin Ming said, "but is that Clerk Song the one they call Timely Rain?"

"That is me indeed," Song Jiang replied.

Qin Ming quickly kneeled and paid his respects, saying, "I have long heard of your name, but never expected to get to meet you today!"

Song Jiang hurriedly returned his courtesy, and as he did so, Qin Ming noticed that Song Jiang was limping a bit.

"Brother, what's wrong with your leg?" he asked Song Jiang.

Song Jiang now recounted everything that happened since he left Yuncheng County, all the way through how Liu Gao had tortured him and tried to frame him for being a bandit instead of, you know, being a murderer and fugitive.

After he heard Song Jiang's story, Qin Ming shook his head and sighed, "If you only listen to one side, how many mistakes would you make? Allow me to go back and inform Prefect Murong (4,2) of the truth."

But the chieftain Yan Shun was like, eh, no rush, stay for a few days first. He then ordered his men to throw a feast to welcome Qin Ming. Meanwhile, those among Qin Ming's men who were taken prisoner were being kept hidden in quarters on the backside of the mountain, though they were also treated to wine and food.

After drinking a few cups, Qin Ming got up and said, "Heroes, thank you for your kindness in sparing my life. Please return my armor, horse, and weapon, and allow me to return to the prefecture."

But Yan Shun said, "General, you're mistaken. You've lost all 500 of the troops you brought. How can you go back? How could Prefect Murong (4,2) not punish you? Why don't you stay here for a while? You can join us and share in all our spoils. Isn't that better than taking crap from those big-hat officials?"

When he heard that, Qin Ming got up and walked down from his seat, saying, "I am a servant of the Song court in life, and so shall I be in death. The court promoted me to general and put me in command of troops. Since I have received their appointment and they have not wronged me, how can I be willing to become a bandit and rebel against the court? If you want to kill me, then go ahead. But I will never join you!"

Hua Rong rushed over and grabbed a hold of him and said, "Brother Qin, don't be mad. Listen to me: I, too, was the son of a government official. Yet, I've been forced into this situation. If you don't want to become a bandit, how can we force you? Just have a seat. Once the banquet is over, I will get your stuff back and let you go."

When Qin Ming still refused to sit down, Hua Rong said, "You've been laboring all day and night. Even your horse needs some food, much less you."

That convinced Qin Ming to return to his seat and resume feasting. The five heroes took turns offering toasts and apologies. Between the exhaustion and the alcohol, Qin Ming soon passed out. The chieftains had some men help him to a room to sleep, while everyone else tended to their own business.

It wasn't until mid-morning the next day that Qin Ming came to, and he quickly jumped to his feet, washed up, and asked to be allowed to leave. All the heroes tried to keep him a bit longer, asking him to stay for breakfast. Qin Ming, though, kept insisting on leaving right away. So the heroes hurriedly arranged for some wine and food, while they returned Qin Ming's armor, helmet, and horse, along with his mace. They escorted him to the foot of the mountain, where they returned his belongings and bid him goodbye. Qin Ming hopped back on his horse and galloped toward Qingzhou Prefecture.

To see what kind of reception this defeated general will get back home, tune in to the next episode of the Water Margin Podcast. Also on the next episode, our heroes engage in some questionable recruitment practices. So join us next time. Thanks for listening.